

# THE EXPOSITOR

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*THOUGHTS ON INFANT BAPTISM.*

THE simplification of theology which began long before the present war is likely to proceed at an accelerated pace when the great struggle has died down, and men are remodelling their lives. Strong tendencies will then operate to expel from the creed or practice of the Church every element which cannot be put in a direct relation to Christ and His redeeming influence. But the effort to discard superfluities and go straight to the heart of things is symptomatic of a sense for reality which may make for recovery as well as rejection: it may be that aspects of the Gospel which had become obscure will make a new appeal. And if this should happen, one of the first doctrines to benefit by sharpened appreciation may well be Infant Baptism. People who used to be certain about nothing in Baptism except that it did not regenerate ought to feel that in the Baptism of little children a presentation of the Gospel is enshrined without which Christianity would be a poorer thing.

There is nothing strange in the fact that Infant Baptism should have caused difficulty. It rather would be strange if it had not. Children are a disconcerting fact to many theories, and it is only what might have been expected that the science which theorises religious experience should be disconcerted too. But what is often forgotten is that the difficulty about Baptism is only one of a class of difficulties scattered over theology, all connected with childhood and its special qualities. Theology would be relieved of a good many problems if everybody was born an adult, though in that case still bigger problems would emerge. Just because everybody is born an infant all kinds of hard questions arise. In what sense can we say that an infant is a

child of God ? Is an infant sinful ? If Christ is Divine, how could He start as an infant ? Can regeneration take place in infancy ? Are infants immortal, and if they die in the first months of life what sort of blessed future can be ascribed to them ? Every one can see that when we proceed to add the question : Is Baptism appropriate to infants ? it is not a sudden change to a new order of difficulty, but simply one more difficulty of precisely the old kind. One and all they arise from the circumstance that the Gospel, as it confronts the believing mind, is a message of personal and spiritual truth, while the personality of infants is so immature that it can scarcely be said to exist in any moral sense. Hence there seems to be no affinity between the two realities we are trying to bring into relation. It is a formidable difficulty, as I have said, but it is not in the least mitigated by abolishing Infant Baptism. Whether or not we baptize them, children nevertheless exist, and from the very outset the Gospel either has or has not a gracious relation to them. If it has—and few would deny so much—then we have to search for a standpoint from which that relation may be seen as figured and expressed in Baptism.

The two gravest objections to Infant Baptism are these. First, it is held, Infant Baptism is not enjoined in the New Testament, nor is there any New Testament record of its prevalence. As late as the third century familiar facts suggest that the custom even then was far from being universal. “ Why does the age of innocence make haste to have its sins remitted ? ” asks Tertullian. Secondly, the practice of Infant Baptism appears to be discordant with the meaning of Christianity, as embodied in the New Testament and re-announced by the Reformers. If there is one truth on which the Reformers, without exception, would have staked everything, it is that Christian salvation is relative to faith.

Infants do not have faith. In their case, accordingly, Baptism has no more significance than any other purely external rite, and ought to be extruded from a spiritual religion.

No answer is possible to the first objection except to admit it frankly. There is no evidence, for example, that the household of the Philippian gaoler included young children. The passage dealing with mixed marriages in 1 Corinthians (vii. 12-16) plainly indicates that in the Apostolic Age it had not occurred to any of the religious leaders that children should be baptized even when the father or mother was a Christian. When St. Paul describes the children of such marriages as "holy" it is expressly on account of a parent's faith, not in virtue of their having been baptized. Jesus gives the injunction that children should be brought to Him, not to Baptism (Matt. xix. 14); and when His beautiful saying that to enter the Kingdom we need to become like little children is quoted in support of Infant Baptism, it is forgotten that the childlike mind He declares to be essential is not the absence of consciousness, but the presence of real trust, humility and wonder.

It is indeed true that Infant Baptism is nowhere explicitly forbidden in the New Testament, and that no cogent proof can be given that none of the Christian households or housefellowships of that date included very young children. It would certainly be odd if it were not so in some one case; only, even so the children may not have been baptized. It is also true and important that in New Testament days the father was invariably regarded as standing for his family in religious matters, and no doubt it would have seemed an unnatural thing that the father should make a complete change in his religious condition and that his children should be excluded from it. Yet there is nothing in all this

that amounts to proof. Positive evidence for Infant Baptism in the first century is wholly lacking.

That, it must not be forgotten, is precisely what might have been anticipated. To begin with, the Church was a mission Church, coming slowly into existence through the preaching of the Gospel; it was being built up as a result of the faith of individuals. Only by degrees did it change into a Christian community with the faith of individuals built up out of it. Even to-day the Baptism of infants is in place only where the children grow up in the midst of a living Church. The reason is that Baptism exhibits its meaning and unfolds its spiritual consequences not all at one moment but gradually as the child lives and grows in vital interaction with a Christian environment.

Again, it must be conceded that when Infant Baptism began to make headway, during the first centuries, it was helped into currency by the magical conceptions which had early attached themselves to the Baptism of adults. "Whether infants or adults were baptized, baptism in either case was held to be a mystery which involved decisive consequences of a natural and supernatural kind. It was the general conviction that baptism effectually cancelled all past sins of the baptized person, apart altogether from the degree of moral sensitiveness on his own part; he rose from his immersion a perfectly pure and perfectly holy man."<sup>1</sup> The Spirit hovered over the sacramental water, converting it into a bath of regeneration and renewal. The actual seed of a blessed future life was implanted by the rite. Without the rite no one could be saved. This general idea of Baptism partly supplied a motive for its novel administration to young children, and conversely the practice of baptizing young children appeared to justify the thought that the sacrament exerted a saving effect without reference to

<sup>1</sup> Harnack, *Expansion of Christianity*, i. pp. 483-4.

any conscious faith or penitence. If at first it had seemed better to postpone until just before death the rite which swept all sin away, this consideration was eventually more than balanced by the feeling that if Baptism is the foundation of a Christian life, and the pre-condition of receiving all other saving gifts, it could hardly be administered too soon.

Turning now to the second objection, which is doctrinal more than historical and is to the effect that Infant Baptism runs counter to the meaning of the Gospel as a spiritual message, we may recall how much trouble the Reformers had over this very point. Luther is a good instance. Naturally he started with the New Testament principle that sacrament and faith go together ; this was fixed for him by his revolt against the Roman theory of *ex opere operato*. But he believed also that Christ had expressly enjoined the Baptism of infants ; can we then predicate faith of them ? Can infants believe ? His vacillations in reply are curious. First he evades the point, and says he will leave the question to the learned expert. Only he would have it noted that God has given the Spirit to very many baptized in infancy, which looks like a reward of obedience to the Lord's command. Next he tries to solve the problem after all, urging that we should bring children to the font in the trust and hope that they do believe, and with the prayer that God would give them more faith. Finally, still unsatisfied, he boldly claims that the sacrament works faith in the child, but how he does not say.

It certainly will not commend the Christian religion to thoughtful men with a keen ethical sense if Infant Baptism should come to be defended by reference to the subliminal consciousness ; that mysterious entity which to-day plays so many parts. There has always been a tendency to remove the fact of experience of regeneration from the clear region of moral consciousness to some dimly-lit sphere.

Much, indeed, might be said to prove that what the Westminster Confession itself teaches is Baptismal Regeneration plus the doctrine of Election ; elect infants, that is, *may* be regenerated by or through the ordinance. If this be so, clearly regeneration is in no vital connexion with faith—a tolerably serious matter for a religion claiming to be spiritual. We can only say that if the Divine new creation is a process in the unconscious depths of the soul, it is unrelated to the Gospel, which is a message addressed to moral spirit, and seeks to elicit a change in our willed attitude to God. Truth as it is in Jesus operates by its meaning, and for unconsciousness meaning simply does not exist. We turn salvation into a nature-process, like atmospheric influences telling on the body, when we divorce it from conscious appreciation and personal trust.

But we need not resort to such devices. Infant Baptism is simply the form of Baptism to which the Church was led by the progress of its experience illuminated by the Spirit, and its justification consists in a complete harmony with the interior sense of the Christian Gospel. Owing to the fact that Christianity came to be a thing of families and generations as well as of individual souls, with a continuous life behind it and around it a redeemed society, the situation to which Baptism had to be applied changed in one crucial particular. It was no longer confronted with pure heathenism. Children were born whose lives began within the Christian area. The Church felt it necessary to decide how the blessing of which Baptism is an index was to be related to the new conditions : her reply (whether at the moment defended by good Scriptural or doctrinal arguments matters little) was Infant Baptism ; and there are excellent grounds for holding that she was right.

(1) Jesus' attitude to children is significant. We read (Mark x.) that mothers came to Him with their little ones,

and that He received them kindly. He did not preach to them ; but He took them up in His arms, put His hands upon them, and blessed them. What does this mean ? It means that even for those who could not have understood His teaching Jesus nevertheless had a real gift ; a gift He could impart and they could receive, namely His love. Through His loving touch the grace of God came to them at that moment in the way best suited to their age, and who shall say that it left no trace ? It is no unheard of thing for people to be informed later of some unusual act of tenderness shown them in childhood, and to feel a joy at every thought of it. We need not search behind the love of Jesus for some mysterious ineffable potency changing these children's " nature," or implanting a new germ in the dark abysmal depths of personality ; His love itself is the reality, and to these children, or some of them, it may quite well then or afterwards have taught a new view of what love is, and set movements going, of thought and feeling, through which they came to reach out in trust to God.

(2) Infant Baptism is thoroughly and characteristically evangelical, inasmuch as it symbolises, significantly expresses and conveys, the preventient grace of God. It stands for the priceless truth : "Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us" ; "We love, because He loved us first." But if it stands for this, it embodies the very core of Christianity. The thought that the Father's love is the fount of all redemption ; that His grace is sovereign and antecedent ; that He does not wait till we have done our part, and then come forward to complete it, but that He does the whole, only leaving to us the task of receiving what He has provided at His own cost—this goes back to the beginning and down to the very roots of Bible religion. "When Israel was a child, then I loved him" ; "I have loved thee with an everlasting love, therefore with everlasting

kindness have I drawn thee" ; " Ye have not chosen Me, but I have chosen you"—in all such great utterances there is enshrined a fundamental principle without which the Christian religion would be unrecognisable.

But this thought that God loved us first—that it was His grace, not our toil or merit, which brought the Gospel into existence and placed us within its orbit ; that He cares for us by anticipation, meeting us on life's threshold with love-laden hands—is evangelical from end to end. He is the middle and end of salvation, but very specially He is the beginning. Spiritual life no less than bodily is His creation. Love divine is in advance of our faith, our prayers, our maturity ; from the outset it is *there*, expectant of our dawning trust. That is very like the providing care of a Father.

It was this principle which operated, whether clearly or more dimly, in the minds of the Reformation leaders when they firmly resisted the Anabaptist arguments. What made the situation confusing was that the Anabaptists seemed only to be carrying out the common religious polemic against Rome to its logical issue. If Baptism, like other sacraments, is nothing apart from faith, as we are agreed, then, they contended, infants must not be baptized. Otherwise you are keeping up the practice of magic ceremonies. The important feature of the answer given by the Reformers is not its theoretic basis but its profound religious instinct. Their exegetical and at times their doctrinal arguments are surprisingly weak, and are occasionally put forward with a hesitation which shows how little they satisfied even their authors. But when they keep to the religion of the matter, they are irrefutable. And the supreme reason to which they appeal is just this, that in Christianity we are receivers. " My faith," as Luther said, " does not make the grace which is in Baptism." The initiative is with

Him, always. “ ‘Tis from the mercy of our God that all our hopes begin.” He enters my life before my eyes are open to behold Him, or my hand strong enough to grasp His love. Baptism effectively bodies forth this truth that we are born into a spiritual society full of the promises of God ; that Christians are around us as trustees while we are still under age, as yet unable to relieve them by personal appropriation of the pledged love. Grace is, as it were, on the ground first ; faith in us is a reaction elicited by the presence of grace. So that Baptism is not properly conceived of as a prayer for love : it is God’s gift of love, stirring our prayer. Like the Lord’s Supper, it is essentially parallel to the Gospel. We cannot say that Baptism means nothing because at the time of administration the child has no faith, any more than we could say there is no redeeming Christ because a given man, after hearing about Christ, has failed to believe. In consequence of Divine love the Gospel came into being long before we were born into the world, though the salvation with which the Gospel is charged is not our salvation until we accept it ; similarly in Baptism the Divine purpose to redeem and bless is certified to faith long before we realise the meaning of the promise.

This matter of the objectivity, the real presence, to call it so, of Divine grace in our lives prior to our full conscious and ethical recognition of it, and even during infancy, ought not to be confused with non-moral ideas of what grace is. In the first months and years of life the love of God affects us through the medium most appropriate to that age, viz., parental love. The doctrinal presentation of Jesus to the infant mind would be meaningless, but we cannot believe that a mother’s care makes no incipient impression of reality and tenderness, or that this is not the actual genesis of moral and spiritual life in the growing soul. Apart from this antecedent experience of human love the

Gospel itself, when heard in later years, would be sheerly unintelligible. Grace, then, can surround us from the first, in ways indicative of and suffused with all the moral meaning which the child mind can apprehend. Thus the Divine promise signified in Baptism proceeds to fulfil itself from the beginning. And as parental care puts a child in debt to others long before he can serve himself, or choose his own path, so through that very parental care the preventient love of God Himself is operating.

One who has grown up in a Christian home may therefore give account to himself of his Baptism in some way like the following : "God," he may say, "anticipated me with His goodness, placing me from the outset in the bosom of the Christian people, who look to Jesus in faith. He met me at life's threshold and by the pledge of this sacrament declared me to have an interest in that love of His which Jesus represents, announcing that for me there was a great inheritance awaiting, which should be mine in proportion as I accepted it. He held forth to me, even then, the blessings that are in Christ, and this offer He confirmed and sealed by the appointed sign. I am able to look up and remember thankfully that I have never been a stranger to the love of God."

In other words, the full significance of Baptism can be perceived and the full blessing of it accepted only as the moral consciousness is sufficiently awake to permit of the meaning of Christ being truly appreciated. But in this there is nothing surprising. If Baptism is just a promise clothed in sense, it is quite a common thing for a promise to be taken advantage of at some period subsequent to its first utterance. Any father may by will convey a gift to his young son upon certain conditions ; and years afterwards the son may assent to the conditions, accept the gift, and find in it both happiness and strength. So in later faith we may

lay hold upon the love with which Baptism was charged. May it not help us to trust that love if we realise that the assurance of it was actually given while as yet we could make no response ?

The administration of Baptism, whether to an adult or an infant, is, let us recollect, an act of faith. When a Christian missionary baptizes a catechumen, on profession of faith, he cannot of course predict whether the convert will or will not do honour to the cause of Christ by the steadfastness of his convictions and the integrity of his life. He may grow in nobility of Christian character, or he may break down and utterly fall away. In like manner, it is an act of faith when in Baptism the infant children of Christian parents have the name of Christ named over them. How their life will grow and mature we cannot tell. Possibly it may be wholly disappointing ; yet so far, as we see it against the background of a Christian family and of the never-failing love of God, we have no reason to believe it may not redound to the glory of Christ the Saviour. In any case, through Baptism and its significance He is stretching out His hands to bless them. As we look on ahead, calculating what the future may bring to them, we cannot forget that the supreme perpetual influence playing on their nature will be that very Love by whose personal presence the very dawn of their day was thus made radiant with promise.

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